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ABSTRACT

This report presents results from a discovery study questionnaire, using forced choice and open-ended items, to assess the types of problems resident assistants (RAs) at the rural campus of Auburn University (Alabama) encounter, their level and sources of preparedness to deal with these problems, and the ways in which the residence life staff can better address their needs and concerns. Results from 31 returned questionnaires (53 percent response rate) showed that problems occurred more frequently in the social and academic areas, hall policy and maintenance, and substance abuse. Respondents felt better prepared to deal with substance abuse, hall policy, and roommate incompatibility. Resident assistants reported that experience was a good teacher and repeated handling of similar problem situations seemed to increase preparedness. Age and upper-class standing aided students' ability to handle health and sexual issues and academic problems. The course-for-credit improved RA's knowledge of facilities maintenance. Respondents also reported wanting more techniques in handling crisis situations, problem solving, case studies, and role playing, and more time to interact with their students. Contains 11 references. (GLR)

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# AN ASSESSMENT OF RESIDENT STUDENT PROBLEMS AT A RURAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Because resident assistants addressed a variety of college student problems, a discovery study questionnaire using forced choice and open-ended items was distributed to a rural campus RA population to assess the types of problems they encounter, their level and sources of preparedness to deal with the problems, and the ways in which the residence life staff can better address their needs and concerns. Problems occurring more frequently covered social and academic areas, hall policy and maintenance, and substance abuse. Respondents felt better prepared to deal with substance abuse, hall policy, and roommate incompatability. Resident assistants reported that experience was a good teacher and repeated handling of similar problem situations seemed to increase preparedness. Age and upper-class standing aided students ability to handle health and sexual issues and academic problems. The course-for-credit improved RAs knowledge of facilities maintenance. Students reported wanting more techniques such as crisis situations, problem solving, case studies, and role playing, and more time to interact with their students.

# AN ASSESSMENT OF RESIDENT STUDENT PROBLEMS AT A RURAL UNIVERSITY

## Introduction

Residents assistants address a variety of college student problems as the campus becomes more heterogeneous and the world more complex. College students face increased instances of stress, alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders, crime, sexual abuse, date rape, and AIDs. Unfortunately, the role of an RA is often very broad and extensive. Since the RA is often the liaison between the student and the outside world, the resident assistant faces critical problems and issues on a more frequent basis. The degree of resident assistants job preparedness directly impacts how they deal with problems encountered by different groups across the campus environment, a factor which subsequently impacts their training.

The purposes of this discovery study are to assess the types of resident student problems encountered by RAs on this rural campus and the degrees to which RAs perceive their preparedness to deal with various student problems, the sources from which they draw their preparation, and the ways in which the residence life staff can better address their needs and concerns.

## Theoretical Framework

### Role of the resident assistant

According to Heppner and Reeder (1984), the duties of a resident assistant include building relationships with and among

resident students and encouraging them to live cooperatively, coordinating programming, enforcing hall policy, monitoring physical conditions, and participating in staff training. Upcraft (1982) views the RA as having six role responsibilities: providing assistance, facilitating groups, programming, referring students, explaining and enforcing hall policy, and maintaining a safe, quiet hall (p. 4). Blimling and Miltenberger (1984) characterize RA functions as including administrative duties, hall control and adherence to policies and regulations, creative programming, helping students adjust, and facilitating a positive, healthy floor and hall atmosphere. They depict the RA as maintaining a tripartite role of teacher, counselor, and role model to resident students in addition to being students themselves.

Student problems and resident assistant training

In a study by Shipton and Schuh (1982), resident students listed all counseling problems with which they dealt and they were grouped in the following four categories: interpersonal, sexual, residential, and social. Health-related issues and instances of sexual harassment appeared to be on the increase from earlier student surveys.

In the Winkelpleck and Domke (1977) study at Iowa State University, resident assistants reported frequent occurrence of personal and social adjustment, and behavioral control (p. 198). They also expressed interest in learning more about dealing with student depression and suicide as well as with roommate problems.

The researchers indicated that problems frequently varied according to the type of hall accommodations. Data suggested that special training programs be system-wide and designed to reflect resident assistant interest and need in addressing specific student problems.

Schuh, Shipton, and Edman (1988) reported that resident assistants at Indiana University--Bloomington encountered a wide variety of resident student problems both in terms of confrontation and prevention. They also discovered that men and women encountered different problems. Among the women, problems included roommate conflict, quiet hour violations, rape, and sexual assault. Male resident assistants were more likely to report problems of a disciplinary nature such as alcohol usage or facilities damage. AIDs and other health related concerns and academic difficulties were of concern to both genders. The researchers conclude in their longitudinal studies that resident student problems have changed little over the past 15 years (p. 24).

Upcraft (1982) classified student problems and advocated the following areas that should be addressed in RA training: conflict resolution, crisis intervention, interpersonal skills, and disciplinary matters. He feels that RAs are often preoccupied about such things as crises situations, enforcing hall policy, earning student's respect, having time for school, job and social life, and working well with their supervisors.

Heppner and Reeder (1984) felt RAs needed training in problem-solving. This on-the-job training proved useful as respondents "perceived themselves as being confident, as approaching problems rather than avoiding them, and as having personal control" (p. 359). Proactive RAs rated positively their training and were more likely to apply what they had learned to problem solving situations.

In a study of former RAs, Ames et al (1979) found that resident assistants list personal growth and development and the experience gained by the responsibility held as benefits to carrying out their RA duties. Given that paraprofessional training was not mentioned in the article implies that RAs may have learned more from experience rather from formal coursework.

## Methodology

### Instrumentation

The survey instrument was drawn from several sources: the review of literature (Shipton & Schuh, 1988; Winkelpleck & Domke, 1977); our university's resident assistant job description; the perceived skills and competencies associated with a resident assistantship (Lillis & Schuh, 1982); and factors unique to our university's location, residence life program, and student demographics. Instrument validity was achieved by adapting this instrument from various sources and by surveying only the population for which it was intended. The alpha coefficient was a .84, indicating a high level of instrument reliability.

The instrument first requested resident assistant demographics information such as gender, age, class, years spent as a resident assistant, and on-campus location. Participants were asked to respond to two, four-point Likert scales: The first scale requested that participants rate how often they, as resident assistants were called upon to use 12 specific leadership skill and ability areas; and the second scale, drawn from their job description, asked RAs to rate their ability to fulfill these prescribed duties. Resident assistants were given a blank student problem assessment sheet on which to list the types of problems they encountered during their tenure, the frequency of problem occurrence, and their individual perceived level of preparedness to deal with each of these problems. An open-ended set of assessment questions requested that resident assistants evaluate their training in terms of what additionally they needed to handle resident student problems, and how the residence life staff could be of greater assistance to them in these areas.

Participant demographics

Typically, our campus' resident assistants are undergraduates charged with maintaining the welfare of approximately 30-50 on-campus residents. Their main duties include serving as an assistant facilities manager and a referral guide for residents' health, academic, and personal concerns.

In the spring of 1991, all 58 resident assistants across campus were invited to participate in the study. Each received a

questionnaire and cover letter distributed by their hall director. A follow-up reminder was sent two weeks later. By the close of the 1990-91 academic year, 31 usable instruments were returned for a 53% return rate. Since the purpose of the study was discovery rather than hypothesis testing, the smaller sample provided enough representation and preliminary information to assess the population, impact the training of future RAs, and redesign the survey instrument in order to retest the next class of resident assistants.

The resident assistants responding to the questionnaire consisted of 69% female and 31% male; and 34% were age twenty-one and over and 66% were under twenty-one. These factors were representative of the larger RA population. In addition, 19% were sophomores, 56% juniors, 22% seniors, and 3% were at the graduate level. While the sample included 84% completing their first year as a resident assistant and 16% in their second year, the overall RA population was divided between 60% in the first year and 40% returning. Half of the RAs responding resided in the older, traditional halls (long corridors and communal baths), 19% lived in the renovated halls (suite arrangements) that were predominantly occupied by the sororities, and 31% occupied the apartment village communities. Ninety-four percent of the respondents completed the resident assistant course-for-credit.

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Insert Table 1 here

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Data analysis

Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and chi square were calculated using an SPSSx program. Correlations were also made between specific independent and dependent variables. Participant responses to open-ended questions were subject to a content analysis to determine strains of thought. Narratives added richness and depth to the study allowing the researchers to critically examine the resident student problems and the RAs ability to cope with these situations.

Resident assistant training course

A one term, three-credit resident assistant training course focused on an orientation and overview of residence life. The course objectives included understanding the wellness model, key health related issues, and college student development theory and placed special emphasis on leadership styles and assertiveness training, results of the Myers-Briggs Personality Typology instrument, and cultural diversity. Students practiced basic helping skills, individual interpersonal skills, and focused on their ability to perform potential duties, understand the nature of their work role, and to identify and respond to the needs of students. Learning was facilitated through required readings, group projects, mentoring of older RAs with newer ones, journal keeping, and class discussion.

Research questions

The study wished to gain insight into the following areas:

1. What types of resident student problems are resident

assistants encountering most often on this rural campus?

2. How do resident assistants perceive their preparedness to handle these resident student problems?

3. From what sources do resident assistants draw the necessary means to handle these resident student problems?

4. How can the residence life staff contribute to the resident assistants preparedness and professional development?

## Results

### Problems encountered

Problems dealing with substance abuse (drug, alcohol) arose more frequently than any other. Resident assistants also reported encountering social problems (dating, sorority related), academic problems (grades, instructors), hall policy (quiet hours, visitation), and facility maintenance problems (lock outs, pests, breakdowns). Respondents identified the following problems as occurring somewhat less frequently: interpersonal conflict (gender, racial, alternative lifestyle), sexual issues (date rape, harassment, pregnancy), serious discipline problems (theft, vandalism), and personal problems (family death, personal crisis).

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Insert Table 2 here

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In terms of their level of preparedness, respondents felt most comfortable dealing with the problems of substance abuse, hall policy, and roommate incompatibility. They felt sufficiently able to address problems encountered with social

issues, academics, and facilities maintenance. Residents assistants felt less adequately prepared to resolve resident student's personal problems, health problems, interpersonal conflicts, serious discipline problems (police related), and problems dealing with sexual issues.

Resident assistants were asked to determine how they deal with resident student problems. Several students indicate that experience was the best teacher:

> Housing can only teach so much, experience is the real teacher.
>
> Experience has been a good teacher.
>
> I have a lot of experience in problem solving.
>
> I think experience is the whole key...through many different situation you learn something new every time.
>
> I felt like my past job experience prepared me.
>
> I learned a lot on the job....

The resident assistants voiced their concerns about specific problem encounters for which they feel underprepared, indicating that perhaps there is a void in their training and experience:

> If the problem is academics, I usually call a friend who might know more about the student's major. I also refer them to the [university student] handbook.
>
> I feel I am ineffective in dealing with people who are depressed and/or slightly suicidal. I really do not know how or what I would need to help me in these situations.

I have a resident who I know is using drugs...what latitude [do] I have in dealing with them.

Medical emergency?...what to do...until the paramedics get there.

More information on health services...more training for alcohol and dietary problems...what to do about theft.

Two other resident assistants voiced their assessment of the problems situations they encountered:

You can never be totally prepared for any problem... you must think quickly to resolve problems.

They [residence life] can't really prepare you for everything, each situation is so different.

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Insert Table 3 here

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Frequently students called upon their leadership skills and human relations skills in addressing problem situations. They also report significant usage of time and stress management techniques in their daily duties. Student felt strongest in their ability to explain and uphold residence hall policy and inform residents of their rights as hall occupants. Consistently reported were their abilities to build relationships with students, be accessible and maintain contact, and exercise mature judgment in situations.

In the correlation analysis there were significant relationships between the RA's age and their ability to address problems of a sexual or academic nature. There were significant chi square relationships between resident assistant age, years as

an RA, and academic class and their ability to respond favorable to sexual issues and health problems. Taking the RA course-for-credit significantly improved RAs knowledge of facilities.

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Insert Table 4 here

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Students were most helpful in articulating their needs and deficiencies and encouraging the residence life staff to provide assistance. Resident assistants suggested a particular trend in the curricular focus of their RA training course:

> Address problems that are more likely to occur.
>
> I never expected so many residents with major family problems.
>
> I think we need more crisis training.
>
> ... I would still like more instruction for crisis situations.
>
> Need more exposure to these problems--we cannot just talk about them.
>
> More discussion with people who have overcome problems.
>
> Have an open line of communication with people ready to address a certain type of problem with step-by-step procedures.
>
> More common sense know-how of routine procedures...

While resident assistants were interested in the specific tasks at hand, they also wanted time to deal with their personal needs:

> I think [we need] a program preparing RAs for things like fire drills, check in and out, emergencies, and "feeling

unappreciated".

Be more specific, concrete, down-to-earth, and practical for staff training, and "incorporate staff bonding activities".

Some RAs expressed satisfaction with certain relevant instructional delivery systems used in their preparedness training. They prefer active, student centered techniques like role playing and case study techniques:

More experience in role playing in class, at workshops. After each role play go over how the situation was handled, Discuss other options that could have been taken...

Role playing on roommate problems, alcoholism, death in the family, and racial problems.

More role playing and more guidelines for specific situations.

More role playing...we need more practice with real life situations.

Case studies class with lecture and then application tests instead of just memorizing.

Resident assistants felt that the residence life staff must provide other means of support whether it is through formal training or informal encounter. They recommend more time, more support, better administrative-staff communication, more personal autonomy and authority, more encouragement, and more time to interact with residents. By the same token, they would prefer less bureaucratic red tape, less politically motivated

administrative action, and less time devoted to administrative policy matters.

For some RAs, the position did not match their expectations, making it more difficult for them to carry out their prescribed duties. Several RAs elaborated on the negative side of their role:

> I never expected so many residents with major family problems.
>
> I thought I would be more of a counselor. I was more like an information booth.
>
> I have enjoyed being a resource and reference person. I didn't expect to have to kill so many roaches!!
>
> I don't see where anything I've done has affected anyone or was needed by anyone.
>
> I thought that I would spend most of my time with people, but.....
>
> Some days I feel more like a policeman than an RA.

Two graduating seniors, however, viewed their experiences in a more positive manner:

> I wasn't sure what to expect but it has been a delightful challenge.
>
> I loved it. I have grown tremendously and will certainly carry with me a lot of experience with working with people. I will miss my dorm a lot--it really feels like home.

## Discussion

This study of resident student problems reported by resident assistants on this rural campus supports Schuh, Shipton, and Edman's (1988) contention that student problems change very little over time. Student problems cited here have differed little from some of those reported fifteen years ago. Since similar studies have been conducted at dissimilar universities, this rural university appears to face much the same problems as any other large campus.

Maturity and personal experience appear to impact greatly an RA's ability to handle problems related to life's social and personal challenges. Resident assistants who gain experience in handling situations appear more comfortable in subsequent situations. Until they have faced a particular crisis, they appear unsure of their ability to deal with it adequately.

The required course-for-credit appears sufficient to cover the mechanical aspects of the position such as discipline, hall policy, and maintenance needs. Resident assistants perceive a need to improve decision-making capabilities necessary to resolve interpersonal, personal, social, health, and sexual problems or issues. Resident assistants seem to want and need specific training such as crisis intervention and problem-solving as indicated by Heppner and Reed (1984) and Upcraft (1982). Resident assistants seem preoccupied with the issues and problems facing the world in general, and they want to be ready to address the crisis likely to touch their resident students, in particular.

According to Barnard (1938), if persons are to function as leaders, they must grasp the nuances of each situation faced. Upcraft (1982) believes that is why some RAs perform well in certain situations but freeze under other pressures. Action and response depend upon each situation and the RAs careful assessment and understanding of the matter. Upcraft advocates that training encompass the resident assistant's interpersonal skill and ability in terms of the institutional definition of the RA role, resident student demographics, and those problems and situations faced by RAs on a daily basis. Hersey and Blanchard (1977) agree that successful training adapts to the problems and needs of both the resident assistant and the resident student.

This discovery study precipitated several changes thus far: The RA course addresses more closely, specific RA concerns as well as perceived RA needs and interests. A fall training session called Residence Life University, a unique simulation exercise was developed to delve into more specific training areas.

Information gathered from this study has been used to completely redesign the survey instrument. Another study will commence soon to reassess RA problems and their perceived preparedness level to resolve resident student problems as a result of the modifications in the resident assistant training program.

Table 1

Resident Assistant Demographics

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| SEX | | |
| Male | 10 | 31% |
| Female | 22 | 69% |
| AGE | | |
| Under 21 | 21 | 66% |
| 21 and Over | 11 | 34% |
| CLASS | | |
| Sophomores | 6 | 19% |
| Juniors | 18 | 56% |
| Seniors | 7 | 22% |
| Graduates | 1 | 3% |
| YEARS AS RESIDENT ASSISTANT | | |
| 1 year | 27 | 84% |
| 2 years | 5 | 16% |
| RESIDENCE HALL | | |
| Suites | 6 | 19% |
| Traditional halls | 16 | 50% |
| Apartment villages | 10 | 31% |
| COURSE-FOR-CREDIT | | |
| Yes | 30 | 94% |
| No | 2 | 6% |

Table 2

Student Problem and Level of Resident Assistant Preparedness

| Problem | Frequency | Level of Preparedness |
|---|---|---|
| Hall policy | 2.24 | 1.71 |
| Roommate incompatibility | 2.67 | 1.89 |
| Personal problems | 2.71 | 2.17 |
| Facility maintenance | 2.25 | 1.94 |
| Academic problems | 2.13 | 1.93 |
| Health problems | 2.85 | 2.39 |
| Social problems | 2.07 | 1.92 |
| Interpersonal conflicts | 3.01 | 2.46 |
| Substance abuse | 2.00 | 1.50 |
| Discipline problems | 3.00 | 2.50 |
| Sexual problems | 3.00 | 2.50 |

N = 32

Frequency: 1=always 2=frequently 3=occasionally 4=seldom

Preparedness: 1=very 2=adequately 3=somewhat 4=unprepared

Table 3

Skills Used by Resident Assistants to Handle Student Problems

| | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Leadership skills | 1.38 | .55 |
| Time management skills | 1.38 | .79 |
| Programming skills | 1.41 | .76 |
| Human relations skills | 1.50 | .67 |
| Stress management skills | 1.53 | .88 |
| Morale building skills | 1.56 | .72 |
| Interpersonal skills | 1.56 | .76 |
| Basic hall operation skills | 1.63 | .71 |
| Student advising skills | 1.91 | .73 |
| Hall support services skills | 2.20 | .85 |
| Team building skills | 2.47 | .76 |
| Life/health emergency skills | 3.03 | .90 |

N=32

Scale: 1=Frequently 2=Occasionally 3=Seldom 4=Never

Table 4

Staff expectations of resident assistants

| | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Explain/Uphold hall policy | 1.45 | .57 |
| Build relationships with residents | 1.52 | .63 |
| Inform residents of rights | 1.58 | .50 |
| Exercise mature judgment | 1.61 | .50 |
| Maintain contact with residents | 1.65 | .55 |
| Comply with policies/procedures | 1.67 | .60 |
| Be accessible to students | 1.67 | .75 |
| Confront residents who violate policy | 1.68 | .65 |
| Rapport with residence life staff | 1.71 | .82 |
| Encourage residents to cooperate | 1.77 | .56 |
| Report infractions and problems | 1.81 | .87 |
| Communicate with residence life staff | 1.90 | .79 |
| Participate in staff training | 1.90 | .79 |
| Monitor physical conditions of hall | 1.93 | .64 |
| Assist with paperwork/hall operations | 1.97 | .91 |
| Be aware of residents needs/interests | 2.00 | .68 |
| Manage time effectively | 2.03 | .66 |
| Support administrative decisions | 2.07 | .74 |
| Make appropriate referrals | 2.07 | .85 |
| Encourage resident involvement | 2.13 | .76 |
| Participate in committee work | 2.13 | .81 |
| Coordinate planning | 2.16 | .70 |
| Assist Hall Council | 2.63 | .93 |

N=32

Scale: 1=Excellent 2=Good 3=Fair 4=Poor

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